

Story by: Cpl. John Scott Rafoss

Date: September 3, 2008

Face of War: One Marine's fight against Hollywood's misconceptions

MARINE CORPS AIR STATION NEW RIVER, N.C. -- Saving Private Ryan, Platoon, Band of Brothers; these are all great American war movies that chronicle the personal stories of infantrymen on the battlefield, and they all have one thing in common – the man now known as the face of war.

Dale Dye is Hollywood's drill instructor. He turns performers into men by making sure they accurately and effectively portray America's soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines on the big screen.

But for Dye, a retired Marine Corps captain, being a military advisor is more than just technical knowledge, it's about going beyond the minute details and into the psyche or soul of the warrior.

“During my active-duty career, I was always a movie fan; particularly military movies. Unfortunately for me, most of what I saw coming out of Hollywood in the 1960's through 1980's was what I considered to be nonsense,” said Dye. “It upset me rather than entertained me. Films were so full of clichés and stupidity about the military that I could barely force myself to sit through one.”

Dye was on a mission to accurately show the world why America's military is one of the best and most professional armed forces in the world. What he saw in a typical war movie wasn't what he saw in the Marine Corps.

“All officers were either ego-driven martinets or clueless lieutenants,” added Dye. “All the noncommissioned officers were dumbed-down lifers with little education and less common sense. All the enlisted folks were ghetto refugees or reluctant draftees who hated the service, particularly combat experience. This just wasn't true. The people in uniform, the people who trained and led me, the people I loved and respected, were getting a bad rap in a very popular medium.”

Dye joined the Corps in 1964 and served as a combat correspondent in Vietnam – surviving 31 combat operations. He was awarded a Bronze Star Medal and three Purple Hearts during the war.

In an effort to explain what type of Marine Dye was, Michael Herr, an Esquire Magazine reporter during the war had this to say about Dye in his book, ‘The Dispatches.’

“And there was a Marine combat correspondent, Sergeant Dale Dye, who sat there with a tall yellow flower sticking out of his helmet cover, a really outstanding target. He was rolling his eyes around and saying, ‘Oh yes, oh yes, Charlie's got his s*** together here, this will be bad,’ and smiling happily. It was the same smile I saw a week later when a sniper's bullet tore up a wall two inches above his head, odd cause for amusement in anyone but a grunt.”

Dye said even the bad times in the Marine Corps were good for him, because with all things said and done, the Marine Corps is all about people who share common bonds and belief with little or no compromise to their position.

“I love the Marine Corps,” Dye said. “Always have and always will. The Marine Corps regularly attracts some of the most intelligent, perceptive and colorful characters ever to emerge from American society. And we laugh a lot, especially when times are hard. That black humor, perverse sense of the ridiculous and irreverent perspective are also elements of Marine Corps life that I reflect on regularly and enjoy.”

Throughout his military career, Dye saw violent combat in Vietnam.

“I think combat affected me deeply,” Dye said. “I saw a lot of it. I suppose everyone who has been in combat will tell you their lives change after that experience. The full range of raw human emotion is on display or personally felt nearly every day in combat.”

These combat experiences gave Dye a very real perspective on life and personal priorities. He formed an opinion that combat veterans are a very special kind of people.

“It’s something that needs to be celebrated, understood and appreciated. Once I realized that, I became determined to do something about it,” Dye said.

After Dye retired from the Marine Corps in 1984, he packed his sea bags and headed to Hollywood. The first time he put on his war face in Hollywood was for the Vietnam War film *Platoon*, which was directed by Oliver Stone, a fellow Vietnam veteran. Dye turned actors like Charlie Sheen, Tom Berenger, William Defoe, Forest Whitaker and Johnny Depp into hardened grunts.

One of the ways Dye is so effective in having the actors play service members so diligently is by having them live and act like recruits in a mock boot camp for a few weeks. Dye trains the actors in everything from proper military formations to physical training sessions.

“He has a commanding presence, and an amazing ability to lead, inspire camaraderie through hard training and hilarious jokes,” said Jake Busey, an actor Dye worked with in *Starship Troopers*. “The one liners he shouts at the group are funny and inspire thought of the long-standing military codes and traditions. I believe the captain’s first words were, ‘Take off them sissy civilian shades private, and fall in now!’”

Dye has trained a long list of actors, to include James Madio, who portrayed the character Sgt. Frank Perconte in *Band of Brothers*. The actor said he didn’t have a clue of how the military worked before his training.

“I wasn’t big on authority until I met Captain Dye,” said Madio. “The minute I saw him, I screwed up and called him General Dye. From that moment, let’s just say we had a very unique relationship. I think I did more push-ups in that two weeks time, then I’d ever done in my life.”

But there is one night that stands out in Madio’s mind.

“We all went back to the bunks after a long day,” Madio recalled. “Late at night I felt the need to walk over to the captain’s quarters and ask him if I can call a girl in New York. At the time we weren’t allowed to just stroll into his office and walk right up to his desk without permission. I forgot to stop at the doorway, forgot to salute, and pretty much got thrown out of his office and paid for it the next day at PT.”

Dye just recently finished filming *The Pacific*, a new HBO television series covering combat at Guadalcanal, Cape Gloucester, Peleliu and Okinawa. The show also re-counts one of the Corps’ most famous battles – Iwo Jima. The show is expected to be on American television in the first or second quarter of 2009.

“What Marine wouldn’t want to work on a major TV series that tells the combat stories of guys like Eugene Sledge, Robert Leckie and Manilla John Basilone? The fact that I did my combat tours in Vietnam with the 1st Marine Division is also an attraction,” Dye said. “The series is going to be very popular, I think, and a good follow on to that hugely successful ‘Band of Brothers.’ It’s much darker and tougher but that’s because the war in the Pacific was so much different in nature from the war in the European theaters of operations.”

One of the actors he trained in *The Pacific* was Joshua Bitton, who portrayed Sgt. J.P. Morgan in the series. Like all of the actors Dye has trained over the years, his hardcore training was no different on Bitton.

“My first impression – ‘Aw s***, that’s a hard son of a b*****!’” Bitton recalled.

“We got off the buses, treated like boots, screamed at, screamed on, confused with almost no direction; we were a terrified bunch. I grew up in New York. I’m not easily intimidated, but the captain had us all in shock, no question,” said Bitton. “Dale Dye taught us to be men in many ways.”

Just like Madio, Bitton gets excited when he thinks back on his training with Dye. One night that sticks out the most is when he had to carry the body of one of his fellow Marines.

“We were shooting a scene where my friend and I find our closest friend is dead the morning after the battle, and had to carry his body back,” Bitton recalled. “It was an emotional day, made more intense after Captain Dye explained in detail what it was like for him when he had to identify the bodies of fellow Marines. The story he shared was obviously painful, but what he added to our performers was something you couldn’t read about or research.”

Modern day war films like *Platoon* and *Saving Private Ryan* have communicated to the public a better understanding of the service and sacrifice of America’s men and women in uniform – past, present and future.

“Understand I’m just one guy here banging away at a very powerful and sometimes very biased establishment, but I’ve been doing it for most of the twenty plus years since I retired from active duty, and you do build credibility over the years,” Dye said.

John Rambo once said, “To survive a war, you gotta become war.” And for Hollywood, Dye is the man who puts that raw “war” emotion and hardened looks into actors. He is the face of war.

“I would submit I have changed the way Hollywood approaches making war or military themed movies and that’s very gratifying,” said Dye. “When you get it right and score a major win for the good guys, it’s a real treat.”